



# MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID AUSTRALIA

## **13 Reasons Why: Plot summary and content warnings**

If you haven't seen *13 Reasons Why* but want to discuss it with a young person, or are trying to decide whether it is suitable viewing for a young person in your care, this summary may help. It covers the basic plot and describes content that viewers may find disturbing. *13 Reasons Why* is not consistent with many guidelines for media reporting and depiction of suicide, and watching it may be distressing for young people, especially those who are vulnerable.

*13 Reasons Why* is a high school based drama recently released internationally on Netflix. All 13 hour-long episodes were released together, on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2017. It is the story of Hannah, a young woman who has died by suicide before the show starts. She has left a box of audio-tapes with Clay, the protagonist of the show, each revealing one of the 13 reasons why she decided to die. On the tapes, she details a number of highly traumatic events that contributed to her developing thoughts of suicide, mostly involving her classmates. Clay is the last of several people who were to listen to the tapes, according to her instructions. As Clay plays them, he learns about many things that happened during Hannah's life. Classmates who have already heard the tapes are involved at various points, providing additional (sometimes conflicting) information and trying to keep him on track.

On the surface, the show clearly set out to do something important, like the novel of the same name; to show that actions have consequences. Hannah was raped, bullied (both on and offline), stalked and harassed. Obscene photographs of her were circulated. The list goes on; as you can imagine, the list is Hannah's '13 reasons' for taking her own life.

**The show contains several distressing and graphic scenes, including Hannah's suicide and two rape scenes** (one of these is Hannah's rape, the other, an almost unconscious classmate, while Hannah is hiding in the room terrified to act).

The story is told out of sequence. Sometimes we see the world through Hannah's eyes, and sometimes through Clay's eyes after her death, often with her voice narrating events as he hears her on the tapes. This can give the impression that she is present after her death, and that she is seeing the impact that her death has had on her classmates and others. Her locker is decorated by classmates who take selfies in front of it, further romanticizing and trivializing her death.

A critical plot point is that towards the end of the show, Hannah does reach out to an adult. She sees this as her last attempt to get help. She talks to a school counsellor and he handles the situation very poorly, and ultimately lets her leave his office without doing anything to help. While this was probably intended to show one specific adult who failed to help, the impression is that adults can't or won't help.

In the end we learn that Clay, who has spent most of the show convinced that he above anyone else must be responsible for her suicide, is the only person she doesn't blame. She included him in the process so that he would understand why she'd pushed him away when they were kissing, after acknowledging their feelings for each other.

### **If a young person hasn't yet watched the show and wishes to, encourage the following:**

- It's okay to fast-forward through upsetting scenes. Viewing them in full is not necessary to understand the story. Suicide and rape are not romantic, and should not be considered entertainment.
- Consider watching the show with a trusted responsible adult as this would allow them to ask questions about themes and scenes that are upsetting or confusing.
- Just because all the episodes are there, doesn't mean they need to all be watched at the same time. Watching an episode a couple of times a week or even less gives a young person time to think critically about the show, rather than risk feeling upset by it.
- *It's okay not to watch the show at all*, even if other friends have.

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